Older Southern American English

Older Southern American English was a set of American English dialects of the Southern United States, primarily spoken by white Southerners up until the American Civil War, moving toward a state of decline by the turn of the twentieth century, further accelerated after World War II and again, finally, by the Civil Rights Movement.[1] These dialects have since largely given way, on a larger regional level, to a more unified and younger Southern American English, recognized today by a unique vowel shift and certain other vocabulary and accent characteristics. Some features unique to older Southern U.S. English persist today, like non-rhoticity, though typically in only very localized dialects or speakers.

Lynda Myles and Maury Leo Erickson imitated older Tidewater accents as the stars of a 1975 *Taming of the Shrew* performance, set in the American South and directed by Keith Fowler.

Contents

History
- Atlantic Coast
- Decline

Phonology
- General Older South
  - Plantation South
- Appalachia
- Charleston
- Pamlico and Chesapeake
- Piedmont and Tidewater Virginia
- Southern Louisiana

Grammar and vocabulary

Current projects

Notes

References

External links

Older Southern American English	
Region	Southern United States
Language family	Indo-European ▪ Germanic ▪ West Germanic ▪ Ingvaeonic ▪ Anglo–Frisian ▪ English ▪ North American English ▪ **Older Southern American English**
Early forms	Old English ▪ Middle English
Writing system	English alphabet

History

This group of American English dialects evolved over a period of several hundred years, primarily from older varieties of British English spoken by those who initially settled the area. Given that language is an entity that is constantly changing,[2] the English of the colonists was quite different from any variety of English spoken today. The colonists who initially settled the Tidewater area spoke a variety of Early Modern English, which itself was varied.[3] The

older Southern dialects thus originated in varying degrees from a mix of the speech of immigrants from the British Isles, who moved to the South in the 17th and 18th centuries, and perhaps also creole or post-creole speech of African slaves.

Language codes	
ISO 639-3	–
Glottolog	*None*

One theory of historian David Hackett Fischer's book *Albion's Seed* is that indentured servants from Southern England settled in and therefore influenced the Tidewater dialect in Virginia, while poor Northern English and Northern Irish families did the same for the early dialect of the Southern backcountry;[4] however, linguists have disputed that such migration patterns specifically influenced the American South's dialect development, with a dialect-mixture model being more widely accepted.[5] For example, an *Appalachian Journal* linguistic article reveals the flawed premises and misrepresentation of sources in *Albion's Seed*, asserting that a singular influence on Southern backcountry speech is based in no conclusive body of evidence.[6]

Atlantic Coast

The earliest English settlers of the colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts were mainly people from Southern England. The Boston, Massachusetts; Norfolk, Virginia; and Charleston, South Carolina areas maintained strong commercial and cultural ties to England. Thus, the colonists and their descendants defined "social class" according to England's connotations. As the upper-class English dialect changed, the dialects of the upper-class Americans in these areas changed. Two examples are the "*r*-dropping" (or non-rhoticity) of the late 18th and early 19th century, resulting in the similar *r*-dropping found in Boston and parts of Virginia during the cultural "Old South", as well as the trap–bath split, which came to define these same two areas (as well as other areas of the South that imitated this phenomenon) but virtually no other region of the United States.

It is difficult to account for all variants of the local accent, which have largely been supplanted by newer Southern features.

Decline

The growth of timber, coal, railroad, steel, textile, and tobacco mill industries throughout the South after the Civil War, along with the whole country's resulting migration changes, may have contributed to the expansion of a more unified Southern accent (now associated with the twentieth century), which gradually ousted nineteenth-century Southern accents.[7] Before World War II, the demographic tendency of the South was out-migration, but after the war, a counter-tendency emerged. Now, a high in-migration of Northerners, especially toward urban areas of the South, may have been another motivation for the abandonment of older Southern accent features. Finally, the Civil Right Movement seems to have led white and black Southerners alike to resist accent features associated with the other racial group and even develop newly distinguishing features, which may explain the sudden adoption of rhoticity among most white Southerners (and continued non-rhoticity among black Americans) since the middle of the twentieth century onwards.[7]

Phonology

General Older South

The phonologies of early Southern English in the United States were diverse. The following pronunciation features were very generally characteristic of the older Southern region as a whole:

A list of typical older Southern vowels[8]

English diaphoneme	Old Southern phoneme	Example words
/aɪ/	[aɪ~æɛ~aæ]	br**i**de, pr**i**ze, t**ie**
	[ai~aæ]	br**igh**t, pr**i**ce, t**y**ke
/æ/	[æ] (or [æɛæ~ɐɛɐ], often before /d/)	c**a**t, tr**a**p, y**a**k
	[æɛæ~eə]	h**a**nd, m**a**n, sl**a**m
	[æɛ~æe]	b**a**th, c**a**n't, p**a**ss
/aʊ/	[æɒ~æɔ]	m**ou**th, **ow**, s**ou**nd
/ɑː/	[ɑ] or [ɒ]	f**a**ther, l**aa**ger, p**a**lm
/ɑr/	[ɑː~ɒː] (non-rhotic) or [ɒɻ] (rhotic)	**ar**k, h**ear**t, st**ar**t
/ɒ/	[ɑ]	b**o**ther, l**o**t, w**a**sp
/eɪ/	[ɛɪ~ei] or [eː] (plantation possibility)	f**a**ce, r**ei**n, pl**ay**
/ɛ/	[ɛ] (or [eiə], often before /d/)	dr**e**ss, **e**gg, h**ea**d
/ɜr/	[ɜɪ~əɪ] or [ɜː] (non-rhotic before a consonant) or [ɜə˞] (non-rhotic elsewhere, or rhotic)	n**ur**se, s**ear**ch, w**or**m
/iː/	[iː~ɪi]	fl**ee**ce, m**e**, n**ea**t
/ɪ/	[ɪ]	k**i**t, m**i**d, p**i**ck
		happ**y**, mon**ey**, sar**i**
/oʊ/	[ɔu~ɒu] (after late 1800s) or [oː~uː] (plantation possibility)	g**oa**t, n**o**, thr**ow**
/ɔ/	[ɔo]	th**ough**t, v**au**lt, y**aw**n
		cl**o**th, l**o**st, **o**ff
/ɔɪ/	[ɔoɪ] or [oɛ~oə] (plantation possibility)	ch**oi**ce, j**oy**, l**oi**n
/ʌ/	[ɜ] or [ʌ] (plantation possibility)	str**u**t, t**ou**gh, w**o**n

- Lack of *Yod*-dropping: Pairs like *do* and *due*, or *toon* and *tune*, were often distinct in these dialects because words like *due*, *lute*, *new*, etc. historically contained a diphthong similar to /ju/ (like the *you* sound in *cute* or *puny*).[9] (as England's RP standard pronunciation still does), but Labov et al. report that the only Southern speakers who make a distinction today use a diphthong /ɪu/ in such words.[10] They further report that speakers with the distinction are found primarily in North Carolina and northwest South Carolina, and in a corridor extending from Jackson to Tallahassee. For most of the South, this feature began disappearing after World War II.[11]
  - *Yod*-coalescence: Words like *dew* were pronounced as "Jew", and *Tuesday* as "choose day."

- Wine–whine distinction: distinction between "w" and "wh" in words like "wine" and "whine", "witch and "which", etc.
- Horse–hoarse distinction: distinction between pairs of words like "horse" and "hoarse", "for" and "four", etc.
- Rhoticity and non-rhoticity: The pronunciation of the *r* sound only before or between vowels, but not after vowels, is known as non-rhoticity and was historically associated with the major plantation regions of the South: specifically, the entire Piedmont and most of the South's Atlantic Coast in a band going west towards the Mississippi River, as well as all of the Mississippi Embayment and some of the western Gulf Coastal Plain. This was presumably influenced by the non-rhotic East Anglia and London England pronunciation. Additionally, some older Southern dialects were even "variably non-rhotic in intra-word intervocalic contexts, as in *carry* [kʰæi]."[8] Rhotic accents of the older Southern dialects, which fully pronounce all historical *r* sounds, were somewhat rarer and primarily spoken in Appalachia, the eastern Gulf Coastal Plain, and the areas west of the Mississippi Embayment.[12]
- Palatalization of /k/ and /g/ before /ɑr/: Especially in the older South along the Atlantic Coast, the consonants /k/ (as in *key* or *coo*) and /g/ (as in *guy* or *go*), when before the sound /ɑːr/ (as in *car* or *barn*), were often pronounced with the tongue fronted towards the hard palate. Thus, for example, *garden* in older Southern was something like "gyah(r)den" [ˈgjɑ(ɪ)dən] and "cart" like "kyah(r)t" [cʰjɑ(ɪ)t]. This pronunciation feature was in decline by the late 1800s.[11]
- Lack or near-lack of /aɪ/ glide weakening: The gliding vowel in words like *prize* (but less commonly in *price* or other situations of this vowel appearing before a voiceless consonant) commonly has a "weakened" glide today in the South; however, this only became a documented feature since the last quarter of the 1800s and was otherwise absent or inconsistent in earlier Southern dialects. Today, the lack of glide weakening persists in the High Tider and updated Lowcountry accents. Full weakening has become a defining feature only of the modern Southern dialects, particularly the most advanced sub-varieties.[13]
- Mary–marry–merry distinction: Unlike most of the U.S. and modern Southern, older Southern did not merge the following three vowels before /r/: [e~eə] (as in *Mary*), [æ] (as in *marry*), and [ɛ] (as in *merry*). Although the three are now merging or merged in modern Southern English, the "marry" class of words remains the least likely among modern Southerners to merge with the other two.[14]
- Clear /l/ between front vowels: Unlike modern Southern and General American English's universally "dark" /l/ sound (often represented as [ɫ]), older Southern pronunciation had a "clear" (i.e. non-velarized) /l/ sound whenever /l/ appears between front vowels, as in the words *silly*, *mealy*, *Nellie*, etc.[11]
- *Was*, *what* and *of* pronounced with [ɑ]: The stressed word *what*, for example, rhymed with *cot* (not with *cut*, as it does elsewhere in the U.S.).[15]
- No *happy*-tensing: The final vowel of words like *happy, silly, monkey, parties,* etc. were not tensed as they are in newer Southern and other U.S. dialects, meaning that this vowel sounded more like the [ɪ] of *fit* than the [i] of *feet*.
- /oʊ/, as in *goat, toe, robe*, etc., kept a back starting place (unlike most Southern since World War II, but like most Northern U.S. dialects today); this became an opener [ɔu~ɒu] in the early 1900s.[15] The modern fronted form of the Atlantic South started as far back as the 1800s in northeastern North Carolina, in the form [ɜy], but only spread slowly, until accelerating after World War II.[16]
- /ʃr/ pronounced as [sɪ] (e.g. causing *shrimp*, *shrub*, etc. to sound like *srimp*, *srub*, etc.); this feature was reported earliest in Virginia.[17]

Plantation South

The area in dark purple approximates the Plantation Southern dialect region, excluding the Lowcountry (the Atlantic coast of South Carolina and Georgia).

Older speech of the Plantation South included those features above, plus:

- Non-rhoticity: *R*-dropping historically occurred in the greater central sections of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, and in coastal Texas and some other coastal communities of the Gulf states. Rhoticity (or *r*-fulness) was more likely in the southernmost sections of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, as well as in northern Florida, western Louisiana, and eastern Texas.[18]
- Trap–bath split: Words like *bath*, *dance*, and *ask*, used a different vowel ([æɛ~æe]) than words like *trap*, *cat*, and *rag* ([æ~æɛæ]).[19] A similarly-organized (though different-sounding) split occurs in Standard British English.
- /eɪ/, as in *face*, was inconsistently pronounced [e̞ː].[20]
- /oʊ/, as in *goat*, was inconsistently pronounced [o̞ː].[16]
- /ʌ/, as in *strut*, was conservative.[21]
- /ɔɪ/, as in *choice*, was [oɛ~oə].[22]
- /ɜːr/, as in *nurse*, was predominantly up-gliding, non-rhotic [ɜɪ] in the "Deep South" (all the Plantation South except North Carolina).[19]

Appalachia

Due to the former isolation of some regions of the Appalachian South, the Appalachian accent may be difficult for some outsiders to understand. This dialect is also rhotic, meaning speakers pronounce Rs wherever they appear in words, and sometimes when they do not (for example, "worsh" or "warsh" for "wash"). Because of the extensive length of the mountain chain, noticeable variation also exists within this subdialect.

The Southern Appalachian dialect can be heard, as its name implies, in north Georgia, north Alabama, east Tennessee, northwestern South Carolina, western North Carolina, eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, western Maryland, and West Virginia. Southern Appalachian speech patterns, however, are not entirely confined to the mountain regions previously listed.

The dialect here is often thought to be a window into the past, with various claims being made that it is either a pocket of Elizabethan English which survived or the way that the Scots-Irish-origin people that make up a large fraction of the population there would have spoken. However, these are both incorrect. Though some of the distinctive words used in Appalachia have their origins in the Anglo-Scottish border region, a more realistic comparison is the way that people in North America would have spoken in the Colonial period.

Researchers have noted that the dialect retains a lot of vocabulary with roots in "Early Modern English" owing to the make-up of the early European settlers to the area.[23]

Charleston

The Lowcountry, most famously centering on the cities of Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia, once constituted its own entirely unique English dialect region. Traditionally often recognized as a **Charleston accent**, it included these additional features, most of which no longer exist today:[24]

- Cheer–chair merger towards [ɪə~eə].[25]
- Non-rhoticity (or *r*-dropping).
- A possibility of both variants of Canadian raising:
  - /aɪ/ pronounced as something like as [ɑe], but possibly [ɐɪ] before a voiceless consonant.[26]
  - /aʊ/ pronounced as [aʊ], but [əʉ~ɜʉ] before a voiceless consonant.[26]
- /eɪ/ pronounced as [ɪə~eə] in a closed syllable, [ɪː~eː] in an open syllable.[20]
- /oʊ/ pronounced as [oə~uə] in a closed syllable, [o~u] in an open syllable.[16]
- /ɔː/ pronounced as [ɔ~o].[20]
- /ɑː/ pronounced as [ɑ~ɒ],[27] with possible remnant pronunciations using even older [æ].[20]
- /ɜːr/ pronounced as [ɜ~ɞ],[27] or possibly [əɪ][19]
- /uː/ pronounced as [ʉː] or [ɤʉ].[27]

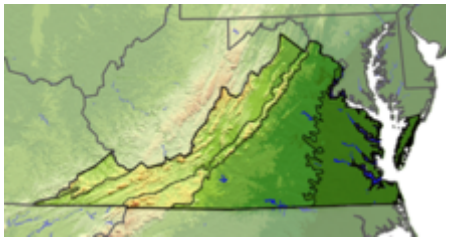
Pamlico and Chesapeake

The "Down East" Outer Banks coastal region of Carteret County, North Carolina, and adjacent Pamlico Sound, including Ocracoke and Harkers Island, are known for additional features, some of which are still spoken today by generations-long residents of its unincorporated coastal and island communities, which have largely been geographically and economically isolated from the rest of North Carolina and the South since their first settlement by English-speaking Europeans. The same is true for the very similar dialect area of the Delmarva (Delaware–Maryland–Virginia) Peninsula and neighboring islands in the Chesapeake Bay, such as Tangier and Smith Island. These two regions historically share many common pronunciation features, sometimes collectively called a High Tider (or "Hoi Toider") accent, including:

- Rhoticity (or *r*-fulness, like in most U.S. English, but unlike in most other older Atlantic Southern dialects)
- /aɪ/, such as the vowel in the words *high tide*, retaining its glide and being pronounced beginning further back in the mouth, as [ɑe] or even rounded [ɒe~ɐɒe], often stereotyped as sounding like "hoi toid," giving Pamlico Sound's residents the name "High Tiders."[28]
- /æ/ is raised to [ɛ] (so *cattle* sounds like *kettle*); /ɛ/ is raised to [e~ɪ] (so that *mess* sounds like *miss*); and, most prominently, /ɪ/ is raised to [i] (so *fish* sounds like *feesh*).[29] This mirrors the second and third stages of the Southern Vowel Shift (see under "Newer phonology"), despite this particular accent never participating in the very first stage of the shift.
- /ɔː/ pronounced as [ɔ~o], similar to modern Australian or London English.
- /aʊ/, as in *loud, town, scrounge,* etc., pronounced with a fronted glide as [aɵ~aø~aɛ].[25] Before a voiceless consonant, this same phoneme is [ɜʉ~ɜy].[26]
- /ɛər/, as in *chair, square, bear,* etc., as [æɚ].[25]
- Card–cord merger since at least the 1800s in the Delmarva Peninsula.[25]

Piedmont and Tidewater Virginia

The people of the major central (Piedmont) and eastern (Tidewater) regions of Virginia, excluding Virginia's Eastern Shore, once spoke in a way long associated with the upper or aristocratic plantation class in the Old South, often known as a **Tidewater accent**. Additional phonological features of this Atlantic Southern variety included:



The old Virginia accent was mostly spoken in the central and eastern regions of the state, excluding the Eastern Shore of Virginia on the Delmarva Peninsula.

- Non-rhoticity (or *r*-dropping).
- A possibility of both variants of Canadian raising:
  - /aʊ/ pronounced as [aʊ], but as [əʉ~ɜʉ] before a voiceless consonant.[26]
  - /aɪ/ pronounced as something like [aɛ~aæ~aə], but possibly [ɐɪ] before a voiceless consonant.[26][27]
- /ɛər/ pronounced as [æː(ə)].[27]
- /eɪ/ pronounced as [ɛ] in certain words, making *bake* sound like "beck", and *afraid* like "uh Fred."
- /uː/ pronounced as [ʉː] or [ɘʉ].[27]
- In Tidewater Virginia particularly:
  - The "palm" words and a select few "bath" words (namely *aunt*, *rather*, and, earlier, *pasture*) pronounced in the mouth and often rounded as [ɒ]. This rounding, combined with non-rhoticity, potentially merge several sets of words, like *maw*, *more*, *ma*, and *mar*, into a single phoneme.[27]
  - /ɜːr/, as in *bird, earth, flirt, hurt, word, dirt*, etc. pronounced with weakly rhoticity as [ɜˠ] or the less common non-rhotic variant [ɜ].[19]

Southern Louisiana

Southern Louisiana, as well as some of southeast Texas (Houston to Beaumont), and coastal Mississippi, feature a number of dialects influenced by other languages beyond English. Most of southern Louisiana constitutes Acadiana, dominated for hundreds of years by monolingual speakers of Cajun French,[30] which combines elements of Acadian French with other French and Spanish words. This French dialect is spoken by many of the older members of the Cajun ethnic group and is said to be dying out. A related language called Louisiana Creole also exists. The older English of Southern Louisiana did not participate in certain general older Southern English phenomena, for example lacking the Plantation South's trap–bath split and the fronting of /aʊ/.[31]

New Orleans English was likely developing in the early 1900s, in large part due to dialect influence from New York City immigrants in New Orleans.

Grammar and vocabulary

- Zero copula in third person plural and second person. This is historically a consequence of *R*-dropping, with e.g. *you're* merging with *you*.

  You [Ø] taller than Louise.
  They [Ø] gonna leave today (Cukor-Avila, 2003).

- Use of the circumfix *a- . . . -in'* in progressive tenses.

  He was a-hootin' and a-hollerin'.
  The wind was a-howlin'.

- The use of *like to* to mean *nearly*; *liked to* merging into *like to*

  I like to had a heart attack. (I nearly had a heart attack)

- The use of the simple past infinitive vs present perfect infinitive.

  I like to had. *vs* I like to have had.
  We were supposed to went. *vs* We were supposed to have gone.

- Use of "yonder" as a locative in addition to its more widely attested use as an adjective.

  They done gathered a mess of raspberries in them woods down *yonder*.

Current projects

A project devised by Old Dominion University Assistant Professor Dr. Bridget Anderson entitled *Tidewater Voices: Conversations in Southeastern Virginia* was initiated in late 2008.[32] In collecting oral histories from natives of the area, this study offers insight to not only specific history of the region, but also to linguistic phonetic variants native to the area as well. This linguistic survey is the first of its kind in nearly forty years.[33] The two variants being analyzed the most closely in this study are the /aʊ/ diphthong as in *house* or *brown* and post-vocalic *r*-lessness as in /ˈfɑðə/ for /ˈfɑðər/.

Notes

1. Thomas (2006:4)
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3. Wolfram, W, & Schilling-Estes, N. (2006). American English. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
4. Fischer, David Hackett (1992). "From the South of England to Virginia". *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. On line stores/Public Libraries: OUP USA. ISBN 978-0195069051.
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6. Michael Ellis (1992). "On the Use of Dialect as Evidence: "Albion's Seed" in Appalachia". *Appalachian Journal*. **19** (3): 278–297. ISSN 0090-3779 (https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0090-3779). JSTOR 40933361 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/40933361).
7. Thomas (2006:4–5)
8. Thomas (2006:7–14)
9. Even in 2012 Random House Dictionary labels due (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/due), new (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/new) and tune (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tune) as having the /yu/ sound as a variant pronunciation.
10. Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006:53–54)
11. Thomas (2006:17)
12. Thomas (2006:3, 16)
13. Thomas (2006:10–11)

14. Thomas (2006:15)
15. Thomas (2006:6)
16. Thomas (2006:10)
17. Thomas (2006:18)
18. Thomas (2006:16)
19. Thomas (2006:8)
20. Thomas (2006:9)
21. Thomas (2006:7)
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23. "The Dialect of the Appalachian People" (http://www.wvculture.org/history/journal_wvh/wvh30-2.html). Wvculture.org. Retrieved 2012-11-08.
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28. Thomas (2006:4, 11)
29. Wolfram, Walt (1997). *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks: The Story of the Ocracoke Brogue*. University of North Carolina Press. p. 61.
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External links

- Example of an old Virginia accent spoken by (http://accent.gmu.edu/browse_language.php?function=detail&speakerid=795) a Richmond, Virginia native, featured in the George Mason University Linguistics program Speech Accent Archive (http://accent.gmu.edu/).
- "Virginia's Many Voices," (https://web.archive.org/web/20080830052030/http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/niceandcurious/manyvoices.htm)Fairfax County, Virginia Library
- *International Dialects of English Archive,* "Dialects Of Virginia" (https://web.archive.org/web/20100609232021/http://web.ku.edu/~idea/northamerica/usa/virginia/virginia.htm)
- "A National Map of the Regional Dialects of American English," by William Labov, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg, The Linguistics Laboratory in the Department of Linguistics at (http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/NationalMap/NationalMap.html)University of Pennsylvania
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